

Beijing crematoriums strain under China COVID wave

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Workers at Beijing crematoriums said Friday they are overwhelmed as China faces a surge in COVID cases that authorities warn could hit its underdeveloped rural hinterland during upcoming public holidays.

COVID-19 is spreading rapidly across China after three years of strict containment measures ended last week, with [health authorities](#) now admitting the true scale of the outbreak is "impossible" to track.

China's top COVID response body on Friday urged [local governments](#) to step up monitoring and treatment services for people returning to rural hometowns to visit family for upcoming New Year's Day and Lunar New Year celebrations.

The latter is the world's largest annual migration, with three years of pent-up demand due to prolonged zero-COVID domestic travel restrictions waiting to explode.

State media and Chinese health experts have downplayed the severity of Omicron, with expert Zhong Nanshan recently saying that COVID should be called the "coronavirus cold".

But millions of unvaccinated elderly people remain vulnerable, and there have been widespread shortages of antigen tests and fever medicines in shops.

Two Beijing funeral homes contacted by AFP confirmed they were operating 24 hours a day and offering same-day cremation services to keep up with a recent surge in demand, despite official data registering no new COVID deaths since December 4.

"We're being worked to the bone! Over 10 of our 60 staff are positive (for COVID) but we have no choice, it's been so busy lately," one crematorium staffer told AFP.

"We are cremating 20 bodies a day, mostly old people. A lot of people have been getting sick recently."

Another Beijing crematorium told AFP that there was a week-long waiting list for a spot.

A recent study by researchers at the University of Hong Kong estimated China could experience about a million COVID deaths this winter without timely intervention such as fourth-dose booster vaccinations and social restrictions.

China has only reported nine official deaths from COVID since mid-November, despite logging more than 10,000 daily infections since then.

There were no COVID deaths reported nationwide between May 28 and November 19.

In the earliest Wuhan outbreak, many deaths of COVID-positive patients went unreported due to strict national criteria for classifying COVID-related deaths, Chinese media reported at the time.

Closed loop

Managers of five nursing homes told Chinese media in a Thursday report that they were unable to procure antigen tests or medicines due to shortages, and had no emergency plans for a wide-scale outbreak.

Staff at multiple Beijing nursing homes contacted by AFP Friday refused to speak about conditions there.

Many elderly homes nationwide have continued pandemic-era "closed-loop" protocols in which staff are required to live on-site, according to notices posted online in recent days.

In addition, China's lack of a primary care system means that hospital facilities are easily swamped by an influx of people with relatively minor

ailments.

Videos of COVID patients sitting on stools receiving saline drips outside crowded hospitals have also been going viral on social media in recent days.

AFP geolocated one video to a hospital in Hanchuan county, Hubei province, whose staff confirmed it was filmed Tuesday.

"The patients in the video volunteered to sit outside in the sun because it was... a little bit crowded inside," the staffer told AFP.

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